

The Fly the Friendly Spies Affair

by GM

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\*\*THE \_FLY THE FRIENDLY SPIES\_ AFFAIR\*\*

by

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Rated PG for violence and intensity

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I

"Is this anyway to run an airline?"

Khartoum.

Mecca.

The names conjured up images of hot desert sun; burning sand beneath the feet, the smell of spice and dry dust in the sultry, arid market places. The domes and spires of elaborately decorated Muslim mosques dotted the skyline. Arabia -- where a brass trinket and/or a man's life went for about the same handful of coins.

An Nafud. Miles of wasteland and shifting sand. The Saudi desert was

broken by the occasional oasis of modern civilization where a Mercedes Benz could be found parked next to a resting camel. An ancient, contradictory land where mysterious, furtive, feminine figures hid behind dark veils, and where white robed sheiks counted their wealth in sheep along with oil wells.

The airport was stuffy. Inside, the overcrowded waiting area swelled with Sudanese families, European businessmen, American tourists, and a confused hubbub of a dozen languages. Outside, the relentless sun blistered fair-skinned westerners and drove them into the meager shade. Even then they were out of the direct rays of the merciless sun, but never free of the dry, burning wind.

However, two Westerners seemed to prefer the hot, open outdoors to the congested interior of the airport. The young men leaned against a wall in a meager patch of shade and engaged in quiet conversation as they waited for the announcement to board their flight. Both men were anxious to exchange sultry Arabia for the cool spring climate of England, and the comforting civilization of London.

Like the dichotomist country they left behind, these UNCLE agents were a study in contrasts. The short, wiry, blond Russian seemed to eye his fellow passengers with cool detachment. But his acute observations were furtive and occupationally suspicious.

The taller, dark-haired man, however, eyed the other passengers with open anticipation. His conversation skipped from speculation on which West End night spot he would visit first, to speculation about the three young American women who also waited for the TWA flight. The women in question appeared to be college students taking their spring break in the mid-east.

Girl-watching was a pastime that was effortlessly pleasing to the darkly handsome senior agent, Napoleon Solo. To him, observation of the opposite sex was as natural as breathing. The study helped pass the many long hours he spent in airports, traveling to the far-reaches of the globe on UNCLE business.

For Illya Kuryakin, watching Napoleon Solo girl-watch had become an amusing game to help him pass the idle hours. With textbook detail, Kuryakin could predict his partner's next moves down to the last detail.

"I wonder if they're flying first class?"

It was more of a hopeful comment than a question but Kuryakin felt compelled to answer. "Tourist. They are students on vacation."

Solo folded his arms across his chest and rested his chin in a cupped palm. "First class. Rich parents."

Kuryakin studied the three girls. They were dressed in the typical fashions of their generation. With jeans and baggy BEATLE shirts it was hard to deduce their social class. He really had little interest in the question, but the speculation gave him something to do while they waited. Trivial banter between the two agents had become a comfortable trademark of their partnership, and was as natural to them as breathing.

He shook his head. "Tourist."

Solo smiled confidently. "Care to make a wager on that, my friend?"

The Russian raised his eyebrows in silent inquiry.

"Dinner at a restaurant of the winners choice in London."

"Done." Kuryakin agreed just as the loudspeaker announced it was time for passengers to board the TWA flight to London.

Solo and Kuryakin boarded the plane and settled into their seats in the front of the tourist-class section. Solo smugly elbowed his partner as the three girls took seats in the last rows of the first compartment.

Kuryakin groaned and Solo smiled in triumph. "I'll have to give some serious thought where I should have you drain your earnings."

"Why don't you ask one of those students out for a date?"

"I'm going to," Solo responded, incredulous that his partner doubted the obvious. "But first I want the pleasure of spending some of your money."

The agents financial philosophies were as different as their hair colors. Kuryakin avoided parting with his hard-earned pay, even on necessities. While Solo cheerfully lavished his earnings on expensive clothes, women, and cars.

They stowed their carry-on luggage under the seat and waited as the plane prepared for take off. Kuryakin took the time to study some of their fellow passengers.

"I am glad we are allowed to carry our weapons."

Because of the sterling reputation of UNCLE, it's operatives were granted various and sundry prerogatives around the world. This status enabled them to bend rules in some instances. One of those perquisites for the international law enforcement agents, was being permitted to retain their weapons on commercial flights.

Solo looked sharply at his partner and automatically tensed for action. He casually scanned the faces of other passengers. "Trouble?"

"No. But I don't like the looks of some of these people," he whispered suspiciously as he gestured toward a shaggy, ill-dressed Arab with a black headband, who had just entered the plane.

Solo's tension eased and he smiled. "I'm sure some of them would say the same about the sinister, mysterious man sitting next to me."

"And they wouldn't wonder about you?"

"I'm not sinister."

The seat belt sign had just flashed off as the jet stabilized to a level flight path. Solo quietly rehearsed his opening lines for the

students as Kuryakin tried to nap. The Russian found it difficult to relax. Unaccountably tense, he wondered if it was some kind of sixth sense warning of trouble to come. Or, was it residual stress from their last mission? Whatever the reason, he seemed destined to endure a sleepless flight. Kuryakin sighed; it seemed they were frequently required to pay a price to save the world.

Solo was entertaining pleasant daydreams of his coming night in London, when his elbow was jarred by the man with the black headband, rushing down the aisle. Before Napoleon could protest, the Arab drew a machine-gun from under his jacket. Then the swarthy man grabbed the nearest stewardess around the neck.

'This is a hijacking,' Solo's mind screamed as he instantly thought of a dozen different rash and impulsive plans. However, he knew it was already too late. In a matter of seconds the plane would be seized. Lives would be suspended in the grip of mindless terror. Instinctively, his right hand slid toward the Walther P-38 tucked in his custom-tailored shoulder holster. He rested his hand on the pistol-grip for the split-second it took him to decide on a course of non-action.

He elbowed Kuryakin awake as he quickly moved his hand from the Walther to the communicator pen in his pocket. With a practiced flick of his fingers he opened the overseas relay channel to New York. Mister Waverly would pick up the transmission as the crisis unfolded.

"No one move! This is a hijack!"

The Arab shouted clipped orders for passengers to remain seated as he nervously waved the gun around the cabin, still gripping the stewardess in a neck lock. Hysteria erupted throughout the plane. There were screams behind them, and Solo risked a quick glance back. Three terrorists with machine-guns stood in the aisle.

Kuryakin sat up and calmly observed the chaos around him. When he shot a quick glance at Napoleon the senior agent indicated the communicator in the pocket. A curt nod was all Kuryakin gave for acknowledgment.

"No one move! You are under the protection of the Arab Freedom Army! If you obey instructions you will not be harmed!"

The confused panic continued as passengers suffered through the stages of shock, terror, and the fear of imminent death. Both agents had to restrain the impulse to calm people around them. They had to curb the desire to overpower the hijackers. They knew better than to try any foolhardy heroics. True, they were trained agents, but the odds were stacked against them. They could not risk a move with this many lives in the balance. Solo and Kuryakin had learned that it was better sometimes to patiently await developments.

A surreptitious glance down the aisle assured Solo the other terrorists were as unstable, agitated, and frightened as the armed man in front of them. Napoleon held up four fingers and Illya nodded.

Solo tapped his fingernail on the communicator four times. He hoped it would alert UNCLE that there were four terrorists. Not that there

was anything New York, or any other UNCLE office could do. This was a confined crisis and the only professionals available to deal with it were he and Illya. The realization did not fill him with enthusiasm. They were a proficient team and could handle almost anything on their own. However, hijackings had never been included in their training.

There was no action they could initiate at the moment. Terrorists were most unstable and vulnerable in the first few minutes of a crisis -- expecting impulsive opposition and heroics. As much as the UNCLE agents wanted to stop them, they knew better than to act on impulse. First they needed a plan, then had to wait for the right time to move.

A terrorist with a red headband, wielding a .45 automatic, savagely pushed a stewardess toward the flight station. He demanded she have the pilots open the locked door. When she refused she was hit on the jaw with the pistol barrel.

Solo tensed and slipped his hand inside his jacket to draw the Walther, but Kuryakin clamped a vice-like fist onto Solo's wrist.

"Not now, Napoleon, it's too dangerous," he snapped, barely above a whisper.

With visible effort Solo relaxed his arm and withdrew his hand from his jacket. A taut jaw line expressed his suppressed anger. "Not exactly what I had in mind for in-flight entertainment," he quietly snarled with contempt.

The leader appeared to be the man in the red headband. He had gained admittance into the flight cabin and within moments the plane banked into a slow starboard turn.

"Back to Arabia?" Kuryakin wondered quietly.

Solo shrugged.

The leader again emerged and spoke to the black-banded man. 'Kuwait' was mentioned, and Solo glanced at Kuryakin, who nodded once.

"Kuwait could mean reinforcements," Illya whispered from behind his hands as he appeared to wipe sweat off his chin.

Solo leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. "We'll have to do something before then."

"Too dangerous in flight."

"Once we land there won't be another chance."

They suspected once the plane was on the ground, passengers would be segregated and placed into well-fortified quarters with terrorist reinforcements. Escape from there would be virtually impossible -- certainly too much for two UNCLE agents to accomplish, no matter how talented the operatives.

When the leader emerged from the flight station he took a carry-on

bag from an overhead rack and dumped the contents onto an empty seat. He tossed the bag to his cohort and gave brief instructions.

"You are to surrender passports and wallets," he shouted. "Any resistance and you are killed."

Solo and Kuryakin exchanged glances. They knew this meant the passengers would be separated according to race or nationality with one group set aside for execution if terrorist demands were not met.

"Our cards," Kuryakin whispered urgently as he carefully reached for his wallet and passport, wary of the nearby terrorist. With an easy, deft slight-of-hand, Illya managed to slip the UNCLE I.D. from his wallet.

Solo feigned nervousness and fumbled for his wallet, hoping the distraction would enable him to perform the same maneuver. But the terrorist was already beside him, the muzzle of the machine-gun inches from the agent's nose. For a split second Solo weighed the risk of trying to extract the card while under the Arab's scrutiny. He knew when the card was discovered it would mean instant death. If discovered now, he, and probably Illya, would be shot on the spot, without any hope of ending the hijacking. The Solo luck seemed to have deserted him just now, and he could see no option but to play out the hand he'd been dealt. With subdued compliance he surrendered the wallet and passport.

"Sloppy," the Russian whispered bitingly as soon as the terrorist was a few seats past them.

Illya's anger was not directed at Solo, but at the ridiculous situation. They were highly skilled agents, trained to extricate themselves from almost any conceivable occurrence. Yet now they were as helpless as any of the other one hundred and thirty-odd passengers aboard TWA Flight 214 bound for terror. Illya shivered with a terrible fear. Not fear for himself, but for what the terrorists would do when they discovered Solo's UNCLE card. Discovery of an UNCLE agent could panic them into a massacre. More personally tragic was that his friend would be marked for certain execution.

As soon as they were unobserved, Solo slipped his Walther out of its shoulder holster and into the seat pouch in front of him. Kuryakin followed the example. It would be fatal to be caught with the weapons in their possession, but in the pouch they were easily accessible and safer from discovery. The Walthers would have to serve as a last resort. Both agents carried enough destructive gadgets to constitute a substantial arsenal, though were restricted from using any devises due to the extreme risk. Using any explosives on an in-flight was suicidal. Any offensive move on their part would have to be well planned for the least possible danger.

The red-banded leader shouted orders to his followers, and Kuryakin instinctively gripped Solo's arm. A shiver of fear ran along the blond agent's spine and his face was drained of color.

"They are going to separate the Americans. When we land in Kuwait, all Americans will be killed," he reported between clenched teeth.

Solo shot him a fast glance, then looked up and down the aisle, assessing the chances of overpowering the terrorists. He and llyya could do it. Two against four were acceptable odds. But the innocent people...

Like evil, spell-casting wands, the terrorists nervously brandished their weapons in the faces of their helpless victims. On the hair4trigger edge of sanity, the Arabs could easily massacre the entire compliment of passengers, and it wouldn't take much to set them oft.

"We could move now," Solo suggested, a fingernail nervously tapping his teeth. "But we'll lose people."

"We could lose the whole plane," was the anguished reply.

To act now might save some lives - Solo's life -- but innocent people would very likely be killed. To delay would mean Solo's discovery and probable death, as well as the deaths of other US citizens. He closed his eyes and shook his head, hating himself for the decision he was forced to make -- his partner's life in exchange for the safety of many others.

Countless times in the past llyya had consciously -- willingly -- risked his life to save his partner. And he would willingly do so now if the opportunity presented itself. But he could not now trade over a hundred lives for one -- no matter how important that on life was to him.

Duty dictated his reply. "We can't risk it," he admitted darkly, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Solo nodded tightly in agreement.

"We will call the names of Americans," the leader shouted out. There were scattered cries and screams from the terrified compliment. Savage swipes from gun-butts silenced the most agitated passengers. No verbal protests could win against the force of cold steel.

"Americans will step to the back of the plane with hands behind head. To resist is to die."

Solo's throat was tight and dry and he knew it was from the helplessness, the tension. There were few life and death crises where he was not in control of the scenario, or, at least, had a viable plan to succeed. He wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers and tried to calm his strained nerves. He knew part of his turmoil was in reaction to the tumultuous emotions roiling around him. Also, part of the reaction was the nearness to death: a position he was well acquainted with. But neither proximity, nor frequency could really help ease the anxiety. Fortunately, years of experience with danger and death had already go prepared him for his own mortality and he could face it with a certain element of dignity.

Not that he had any intention of giving up in this situation. He was still mentally reviewing a number of possibilities. However, even his innate optimism was daunted by the bleak circumstances. So far he had been unable to find any positive solution. Thus, there was only one place left to turn. As he had countless times in the past, he turned

to his most dependable ally.

"You're our only ace, llyya," he whispered as he tapped his friend's knee. "Don't make a move unless you have a reasonable chance of success, and the altitude is low enough. But to save any Americans, it will have to be before we land."

From the back of the plane the leader had started calling out names and U.S. citizens had started the death-walk to their waiting destiny. The name of one of the college girls was called and all three young women broke out in anguished cries as the first of their group stepped back.

Solo's initial instinct was to rush to their defense, but he knew it would be a foolishly fatal mistake. Still, it was agonizing to sit by and watch the terror preyed on his fellow countrymen. He tried to ignore these external agonies that scrapped at his nerves. He was a trained agent -- he had to deal with this situation as objectively as possible. It was the only way to save his life and hope to save any of the others.

II

"I NEVER DID LIKE ECONOMY CLASS."

About forty Americans had been crowded into the rear of the plane, while the non-Americans had been dispersed in the rows behind first class. Solo's name had not yet been called and the agent tried to ease the knot of tension that gripped his chest. The waiting had at least given him a few more minutes to confer with his partner.

"Whatever happens, don't make your move unless the time is right. Even if -- well," Solo sighed in exasperation. "Whatever happens to me -- I can take care of myself."

Kuryakin quietly snorted with derision and stared at the floor with unusual intensity. "Since when?"

Solo stole a quick glance at his partner. "And don't go for any Errol Flynn imitations either!"

The tension was telling on them both. It would be toughest on llyya, whose job would be to watch and wait. The only bright aspect the senior agent could think of was that their positions were not reversed. It was far easier to endure risk to himself than danger to his partner. Besides, he did not have the patience Kuryakin had, though even the impassive Russian was exhibiting the strain of the crisis; the tightness in his voice, the stress lines around eyes that were now frosty blue with dread.

The terrorist leader was reading one of the passports and the word 'Russian' could be clearly heard. Kuryakin caught enough of the leader's conversation to know they intended to release him when they landed, granting him preferential treatment because of his Soviet citizenship. He almost writhed under the oppressive guilt. How ironic that he and Solo had developed a close friendship despite their respective nationalities. Now, those backgrounds would free him while his friend was condemned to probable death by the consequence of being born in the 'land of the free'.

Solo had noticed Illya wince when the passport was discovered. From the expressions on the terrorists, he could guess their conversation. Even easier to read was his partner's guilt-ridden face. He steeled to ease the stress with some familiar banter. "I always knew you were a smart Russian. This time it seems to be smart to BE Russian."

Illya wanted to apologize for this cruel twist of fate. He longed for just the right words that could somehow convey some comfort to them both. There was no time to express his emotions even if he would have been able to do so. His natural reticence prevented him from revealing any deep feelings. Solo's own sense of privacy would discourage any such maudlin confessions. They had never needed that kind of sentimentality; they knew each other's feelings without having to talk about them.

More important than finding appropriate words, was taking some kind of aggressive action. He wanted to stay with his partner and face whatever the terrorists had in mind. Together, they were almost invincible. Separated -- he tried not to think about it, though the terrible possibilities haunted his imagination. Dealing with terrorists was like trying to reason with a pack of mad dogs. There was no point of reference for sanity. He could not read these fanatics like he could the criminal mind, or the familiar motives of THRUSH.

As soon as the Arabs found the UNCLE card they would kill Napoleon, and there was nothing he could do to stop the inevitable.

Kuryakin came to a sudden decision. "I will come with you."

They had to make their move now - though every piece of reason objected to the mad plan -every instinct told him it was right. Never mind the rules of chivalry, the policy of UNCLE, the responsibility of protecting the innocent... What suddenly mattered more than any of those noble guidelines, was the life of the man next to him.

"But you've already got a window seat," Solo quipped, refusing to become melancholy. He nudged Kuryakin reassuringly. "I'm sure something will turn up. You've never failed me yet."

The comment was a sincere expression of complete faith. It served to return the Russian to a proper degree of professionalism. The fate of everyone, including Napoleon, rested in Kuryakin's ability to keep his head.

"Solo. Napoleon Solo."

The announcement of his name was met with the stoic calm Solo used to meet every other life-threatening moment in his career. He glanced at his partner and was heartened to see Illya's blue eyes were already alight with anticipation. The Russian had a plan. Solo just hoped it was not too dangerous for his partner.

The terrorist again called out Solo's name. Before Napoleon could react, Kuryakin leaped up.

"This is the American, Solo," he accused in a thickly accented voice. For good measure he pushed at Solo's shoulder. "Join your fellow capitalists, American pig!" he shouted.

Solo obediently stood and locked his hands behind his head. "Take care," he admonished quietly as he stepped into the aisle.

Kuryakin inclined his head in a curt gesture of acknowledgment. "Don't be a hero," he whispered, though he knew he might just as well have asked Solo to stop breathing.

A grin quirked at the corner of Solo's mouth when he winked at his partner. As he walked toward the back of the plane he projected the image of complete confidence.

Three of the terrorists were in the economy section. One left and returned a moment later with the leader. All passengers who were not U.S. citizens were ordered to the forward section. Kuryakin took advantage of the confusion to slip both Walthers from the seat pouches to his jacket pockets. Then he was moved to the front of the economy section. He made sure he got an aisle seat. When the time came to make his move, he would need room to maneuver instantly, with weapons ready. The prickling hairs on the back of his neck warned him that the deadly moment of crisis would be too soon.

"Solo," the leader spat at the dark-haired agent. "You are diplomat."

Solo remained unflinchingly calm. "No, just a clerk with the government," he responded easily.

The leader studied Solo for several silent moments. Then he issued some orders to his colleagues. Solo was pulled to the side of the aisle and the scarred-faced man continued to check passports. He showed the leader's another passport. The leader scanned the plane.

"Kuryakin?"

Illya stood and identified himself in his native language. He noted with interest that all the terrorists understood Russian. The embodiment of indignation, he protested the inconvenience of the hijacking.

The leader apologized and inquired about the diplomatic status of Kuryakin's passport. Illya made a few vague comments about government intelligence work. As expected, the Arabs were suitably cowed. They assured he would come to no harm.

"I am sure of that," Kuryakin returned acerbically.

"You will be released as soon as we land," the leader promised.

Kuryakin nodded and returned to his seat. He had to suppress the smirk he felt twitching the corners of his mouth. Now that he had thrown suspicion away from himself, he would be free to come in for a surprise attack.

The rest of the Americans were crowded into the rear of the plane. People huddled together, clutching each other in the stark fear of imminent death. Solo felt a terrible pity for these innocent victims who were confused and shocked and about to die for something they

didn't understand.

Most people are never called upon to give their lives for their country. In Korea, he had put his life on the line as an American soldier. It was different to be killed like this.

He had always considered his patriotism a natural product of birth. Now, as he looked around at his fellow countrymen, he realized it was more than that. There was an underlying strength beneath the fear in these pallid faces. These Americans would not go down without a fight. With a flush of pride, he promised himself he would not let them fight alone.

That anyone might die at all made him angry. At least he had some ability and skill to fight back with. Considering his tremendous training and audacity, he would be able to take quite a few of the terrorists with him.

His inherent compassion made him want to reach out to assure these miserable passengers that there was hope beyond the terror and a chance for life outside this dark hell of horror. He understood their anger and frustration at being pawns - helpless victims of blind hatred. Yet, to end this reign of terror, he would use these people too, if he had to. He fleetingly wondered if he was any better than the terrorists themselves.

'For the greater good', covered a multitude of sins, he realized. It created a certain self-loathing for himself and his job. That he could use innocent people -- HAD used them frequently -- for some noble purpose, was not really very noble. Sometimes those innocent pawns had died. Solo wondered how many of them would die before this nightmare was over.

UNCLE agents, particularly he, went around with an arrogant attitude of infallibility. He once believed any situation could be successfully handled, and any operative he brought into a scenario would be protected by his skill and luck. Tragically, there had been times when his luck ran out. How many would be unlucky on this flight? A pang of guilt struck him as he surveyed the faces around him. Better one of these unknown victims die than Ilya, was his immediate thought. Not exactly a proper thought for an agent, and definitely against UNCLE policy, but he couldn't deny the opinion -- a liability of becoming too close to a partner, to a friend.

A blond flight attendant was helping one of the young college students who had been shoved to the deck. The young girl was too hysterical to move. A terrorist with an ugly scar along the neck became impatient and slashed the stewardess with a pistol. She collapsed into the aisle, the terrorist's weapon poised to smash into her face a second time.

Instinct abruptly overtook logic. Even as his lightning reflexes flashed out and he seized the barrel of the pistol, Solo knew he was being stupidly heroic.

"That's no way to treat a lady," he snarled as he pulled the weapon back.

The close quarters of the aisle, crowded with Americans shuffling to find seats, was the only factor that saved his life. Unable to get a

satisfactory bead on the agent, the terrorist behind Solo smashed the UNCLE agent across the shoulder with the butt of a machine gun. The blow knocked Solo onto his back and into a nearby seat. His first reaction was to fight back, but another show of resistance would get him killed. He raised his hands in surrender, but the motion was lost on the terrorist with the vicious scar.

The next blow from the machine-gun smashed into Solo's ribcage. He curled up in an instinctively defensive pose, then was struck on the side of the face with the weapon. The blow left him stunned and completely at the mercy of his attackers. His thoughts were dizzily incoherent, but through the haze of pain he realized, with self-recrimination, that this was an embarrassingly ignominious way to die. Ruefully, he realized he had completely lost his sense of timing.

An achingly taut partner watched the scene with scant outward reaction, except for the fists that were clenched so tight the knuckles matched the whiteness of his face.

A carefully neutral expression belayed his inner anguish.

Inside, his mind writhed with sympathetic anguish. They were mercilessly beating his partner --already Napoleon's face was a bloodied pulp -- and there was nothing he could do to stop the savagery. A premature move now would still risk destroying the plane and all aboard, but could save Solo from more excruciating pain, or even death. For a frantic moment he weighed the choices - Napoleon's life for several innocent passengers? For the entire planeload of victims? His conscience pleaded in Solo's behalf, but training and reason kept him silent.

Each thud that connected with Solo's body caused an involuntary clenching of Kuryakin's fists, and invoked a silent promise that this attack would not go unavenged. Somehow it was little comfort.

He silently cursed the heroic Napoleon for always playing the white knight. He cursed this unbalanced world, where they risked their lives every day trying to save the planet, yet, now Solo was about to die at the random whim of madmen. He cursed the fanatical insanity that condemned his friend to die on the basis of nationality.

"Stop!"

The command was so involuntary Kuryakin hardly recognized his own voice. The terrorists were just as surprised and stopped the beating. All eyes were on the Russian.

"If you kill him now, international sympathy will not be on your side," Kuryakin eloquently offered in Russian. He held his breath as the terrorists caucused.

The scarred man dragged Napoleon into the aisle and Kuryakin sighed with relief at a sign of life from Solo. The wounded agent moaned and struggled to prop himself shakily up on an elbow. But the next breath caught in Illya's throat. Excited shouts came from the terrorists. The vicious attack had ripped Solo's expensive jacket. Now, plainly visible, was the UNCLE Issue black shoulder holster.

For several minutes there was confusion as the terrorists cried and gestured at the agent. Solo was roughly seized by the collar and nearly choked as he was slammed against a seat. His chest screamed in agonized protest as a sharp stab told him ribs had broken or cracked and were painfully pressing against a lung. His breathing was tight and short.

He wiped the blood out of his left eye as he stared up at the Arab screaming at him. The leader came over and grabbed the exposed shoulder holster. Solo thought the maniacal terrorist would take his arm off along with the leather.

"Your weapon!" the Arab shouted, jamming a pistol into Solo's throat.

"Airport security - made me put it in my luggage," the agent almost choked from lack of air.

The .45 slashed across his face.

"Lie!" the Arab shouted. "Where is weapon!"

The left side of Solo's face had gone numb and his vision was blurring. He breathed as evenly as he could with constricted lungs and the pistol as his throat.

He spit out the blood in his mouth. "No weapon," he tiredly shook his head, his words slurred from swollen lips. "I told you."

He chanced a glance toward first class, and saw llyya tensely observing the interrogation. Solo strove for his most convincing tone. Surely anyone with his sophisticated charm should be able to convince these scum terrorists of almost anything. "No weapons," he repeated. "How could I get them aboard?"

The leader issued some instructions, and Solo shivered when he saw the black-banded man searching through the wallets. He could now count his life-span in a matter of minutes.

His tie was ripped from the shirt collar and his face was shoved onto the deck. A knee ground into his spine as they yanked his arms back and bound his wrists so tightly there was no circulation left in his hands.

Absurd thoughts flashed through his mind; he wondered if the communicator was still functioning, and hoped the fight had damaged the instrument. He didn't like the idea of his death being broadcast across the world. He could no longer see llyya, and hoped the Russian had the sense to maintain control. It would be very unpleasant for llyya to watch him executed, but llyya was a top agent -- he'd know to stay out of it.

It seemed like only a few moments until the terrorists were again shouting with agitation. They brandished his familiar leather wallet in the air like some kind of grim trophy. He was shoved onto his back and the gold UNCLE card was flung onto his chest.

The leader seized Solo by the hair, growling into the agent's face. "American spy!" he screamed savagely, then abruptly released Solo. He stood, screeching in Arabic, punctuating his tirade by repeatedly

kicking Solo until the agent was convulsed with pain and coughing up blood.

"You are UNCLE! SPY! How did you know of us?"

The leader released his grip on the dark, matted hair now sticky with blood. Solo sagged to the deck.

There was no need to answer the rhetorical question even if Solo had been able to speak. He was yanked up to his knees and would have fallen if the scar4aced man had not grabbed a handful of his hair. The muzzle of the .45 was pressed against Solo's temple.

Solo felt the cold steel dig into his skull and realized this was the end. There was a comforting haze of pain that detached him from reality and robbed the edge of panic from the moment. The mad chatter of the terrorists seemed a fitting background to the macabre scene. He could barely see out of his right eye, but he dared a glanced toward the front of the plane.

Kuryakin stood near the aisle, unguarded by anyone. Solo could read every nuance of Kuryakin's stance and carefully controlled expression. The Russian was ready to go into action and Solo knew heroics would be all wrong. Nothing could save him now, and he refused to let a plane full of innocent people, and llyya, go down with him.

He rapidly blinked his eye three times. For a moment Kuryakin seemed confused at the signal. Then the Russian defiantly shook his head.

The terrorist with the scar and the one with the red headband wanted to execute Solo instantly. The leader wanted to interrogate Napoleon to ascertain how the agent knew about the hijacking.

Kuryakin shot a glance out the window. They were still well above the 10.000 ft. decompression altitude. If a bullet ripped through the fuselage now, the interior of the plane would be depressurized and anything inside would be sucked out. The plane was descending, but not fast enough.

The argument in Arabic had reached a crescendo and the leader was outvoted. They would kill Napoleon now.

llyya had to act now. He could not stand by while his partner's brains decorated the interior of the 727!

Yes, his job was to protect innocent lives, to save the world from oppression and evil, but today the world - his world -- had been tipped upside-down. Their UNCLE training and experience seemed of little value against this kind of mindless terrorism. Black and white ethics distorted under the guns of madmen. So many times he and Napoleon had put their lives on the sacrificial block for the good of the world. llyya could not accept the insanity, this time, nor would he accept the waste of his friend's life.

He could see the dismay in Solo's face when he gave the counter signal for action.

"No!" Solo screamed.

### III

#### "WYATT EARP AT THE TWA CORRAL."

Solo's distraction was all Kuryakin needed. The Walthers were out of his pockets in less than a second. A single bullet in the back of the brain took out the terrorist in the red headband.

Passengers dropped to the deck - realizing the long-expected shooting had started. Ilyya moved to a more advantageous firing angle and drew a bead on the scar-faced Arab. Agonizingly, he did not have a clear shot at the leader, who held the pistol to Solo's head. Ilyya would have to go for the terrorists within easiest range, even if his friend was executed before he could kill the leader.

Before the scar-faced man could bring up his machine-gun, Ilyya fired both pistols, instantly killing the terrorist. The dead man's finger pressed the trigger of the machine-gun as he went down and lead raked the luggage rack, echoing against the bulkhead. Some bullets glanced off the metal into nearby passengers. The aisle crowded with panicked people running from death, with nowhere to go.

The leader had hesitated for a vital second and it bought Solo enough time to fall against the Arab and unbalance the gunman. Two bullets rang out, one of them cracking a window.

With an urgency that constricted his throat, Kuryakin sprinted forward, leaping several seats in an effort to reach the leader before his partner could be killed. That Solo might already be dead was an agony as tangible as the gunpowder he smelled in the air.

The pressure against the starved window became too great and the glass abruptly exploded outward. The depressurization brought a new panic. Bags and clothing were sucked outside and people were blown toward it, their screams drowned by the painful ache Kuryakin felt against his ears. The plane took a sudden dive at a forty-five degree angle and the pressure just as suddenly decreased as they descended below 10,000ft.

Kuryakin instantly regained his balance and leaped over the last few seats. The pounding of his heart was almost as loud as the terrified shouts around him. The Arab leader had recovered from his fall and was just rising above the seat to aim the machine gun. The Walthers kicked in the Russian's hands as Ilyya fired both pistols. The impact of some half dozen bullets threw the Arab back against the seats to fall with his head in the aisle.

The rest of the passengers were now recovering from their battle-shock. They helped one another to regroup and share the joy of being alive. Kuryakin spared a brief glance down the aisle and assured himself all the terrorists were dead. One of the alert attendants was already collecting the weapons.

Kuryakin pushed his way back to where the lead terrorist had fallen. What concerned him most was the body under the Arab's feet. Ilyya's heart jarred to a halt when he received his first close look at his associate. He fell to his knees and dragged Solo into the aisle.

Most of Solo's face was washed in a scarlet layer of viscid blood, the left cheek and ear blackened by powder burns. The rest of the face was puffy and discolored from the injuries. A shallow rise and fall of the chest assured llyya that Solo was still alive.

Kuryakin wiped away some of the blood from the deep bullet crease along the side of the head. The execution had come within mere millimeters of success and the realization chilled the Russian. llyya reminded himself head wounds bled excessively and the wound may not be as serious as it looked, but the reminder offered little comfort.

He untied Solo's bound wrists and tried to massage circulation back to the hands. As gently as possible, Kuryakin placed the wounded agent on his back and examined him for other injuries. Contusions, several broken facial bones - including the nose -- were relatively minor compared to a likely a skull fracture and possible concussion. As far as internal injuries were concerned there were probably unseen damages beyond his ability to repair.

He accepted some pillowcases from the blond stewardess who had come to assist. With shaking hands he pressed the cloths against Solo's head.

"Will he be all right?" she wondered in an unsteady voice.

"Yes," Kuryakin replied curtly, denying the whisper of his own doubts.

"He stopped that terrorist from killing me," she said as she helped wipe some of the blood from the senior agent's face. "I hope he doesn't die."

Kuryakin's throat was too constricted to add his fervent hope to hers.

Amazingly, Solo was the only casualty. In other circumstances llyya would have appreciated the incredible luck of the rescue. He glanced down at his terrible wounded friend and felt no sense of accomplishment.

With no doctor available, there was little the Russian could do but apply rudimentary bandages from the first-aid kit. By the time he was finished, his partner looked more like the reincarnation of a mummy than a Human; only the right eye and part of the mouth were visible amid the cuts, abrasions, and broken bones now swathed in bandages.

Solo was carried into a back corner of the plane. With the help of a pile of blankets and pillows donated by the flight attendant, Kuryakin propped the wounded agent against his chest to ease the labored breathing. It was a gesture to help him as much as Solo. Feeling the weak pulse was reassuring, and the physical bond of holding on fulfilled a need to be close to the friend he had nearly lost. Almost a superstitious protection against the possibility of still losing him.

Kuryakin also used his partner as a tangible barrier against intrusion from the well-meaning passengers who pressed around to

shower him with gratitude and offers of reward. The only reward the Russian needed he held in his arms.

Kuryakin was not above using the gravely injured Solo as an excuse to keep all others at bay and jealously preserve their solitude. The Russian did not feel any flush of victory. The trauma they had just survived had left wounds on Illya's psyche. There were injuries that could not be seen with the eyes, which could only be healed by the recovery of his partner. He was still gripped with anxiety, knowing that recovery was still far from absolute. Solo's injuries could yet prove fatal, but he forced himself not to think of that grim possibility. Instead, he concentrated on these few suspended moments he could be alone with his friend.

Thoughts stretched into a kaleidoscopic oblivion, where he felt nothing but the shaky aftermath of terrible fear. The memory of the near execution burned in his mind with a searing agony, which would never be erased. They had both come so close to death before, but never quite like this. When he had seen Solo on his knees, the pistol pressed against the temple, it had been too much -- the breaking point of Illya's endurance. The execution would have been a tragedy he would not have recovered from.

His impulsive gun-battle had taken a dangerous risk, but he would have accepted any risk to save his partner's life. Illya knew he would do it all again if necessary.

He tucked the blanket more securely around his friend's shoulders and studied the all but obscured face. That Solo would not live was impossible to comprehend. They had traveled such a long, winding road together. Life without his enigmatic partner was too bleak to imagine.

Their precarious careers prepared them both for death in the line of duty. The loss of life for such a useless reason as terrorism -- the waste was too much for Illya to accept. Not that he was sure he could ever accept Napoleon's death. At the moment, Illya wasn't sure about anything in his life.

The futility of the mindless violence and terror of the day boggled his reason. That this fanaticism nearly robbed him of a life more important to him than his own, filled him with a frustrated rage at the idiotic causes of the world.

The brooding was interrupted by the pilot, who sat down beside Kuryakin.

"Everything is almost back to normal, thanks to you," the captain said as he shook Illya's hand. "You saved our lives."

The Russian shrugged off the compliment. "I did what was necessary."

"Risking your life like that?" The pilot was incredulous. "Beyond the call, sir. You weren't even personally threatened."

"Everyone was in danger," Kuryakin countered, but silently specified that HIS FRIEND had been the one in extreme peril. He didn't need any other kind of motivation.

"You saved Americans, yet, you're a Russian as I understand it."

"Nationality matters little in a situation such as this," the agent insisted, uncomfortable with the quasi-interrogation. He never thought in Anglo-Soviet terms anymore. Years in Europe, then the US -years with an American partner, had taught him national boundaries meant nothing in personal relationships.

"It took great courage." The pilot lauded sincerely. "You're a very heroic man. Not many could do what you did."

In the agent's eyes it had taken little courage for him to kill the terrorists. Fear had motivated every thought and action. Fear that he would not be able to save Napoleon. In his eyes, to be heroic was to have the quiet, brave stoicism when the .45 had been pressed against Solo's head. The trade of his own life for the rest of the passengers was a natural heroism inherent to Solo, and did not stemmed from the occupation of UNCLE agent.

"There's no way we can thank you enough, of course. Is there anything we can do for you?"

Kuryakin gestured toward Solo. "Fly a straight course to the nearest hospital."

"We're scheduled to land at a US air base in Germany. A safe harbor, as it were. They have one of the best hospitals in Europe," the pilot reassured hopefully, but saw it had no affect on the agent. "I hope he makes it."

"He will." A reply of forced optimism.

"I guess you are agents of some kind?"

Illya identified their affiliation with UNCLE and requested anonymity due to their confidential work and the need to keep their identities secret. The captain reluctantly agreed and again asked if he could offer any assistance. Kuryakin requested their local office in Germany be notified of their arrival, and indicated that was all that was required. The pilot readily agreed and returned to his duties.

Kuryakin's mind was sunk in deep contemplation when he was startled by Solo's harsh coughs. He sat up and eased Solo up until the coughs subsided.

"Napoleon?"

A hazel eye blearily opened and took several seconds to focus on the close face.

"Your expression," he said in painful, labored breaths, "says it was a near thing." His speech slurred from swollen lips.

"Too near."

"Did we beat the bad guys?"

"Of course. No thanks to your foolhardy gallantry. When WILL you

learn to restrain your heroics?" he chided. A remonstrance that eased some of the tension from the crisis.

A smile twitched at the corner of Solo's mouth. "It was worth it," he assured, coughing again. A small trickle of blood from his lips was grim reminder that Solo was still in grave danger. "...worth it to see you - Walther in each hand, blazing away like Wyatt Earp at the TWA corral."

"Sometimes your antics require extreme rectifications." Kuryakin's grimace turned into a grin. "Besides, I was doing my Errol Flynn imitation." He placed a hand on his companion's forehead and frowned at the fever. "Will you never shed your hero-complex?"

Just then a small delegation of passengers, led by the blond stewardess and the three college students, interrupted them.

"We just wanted to see how you were, and thank you both," said one of the girls. She punctuated the statement by kissing llyya on the cheek.

The Russian's fair face blushed.

"What about heroics, Galahad?" Solo teased quietly.

"The captain said we couldn't mention your names to the press or anything," the stewardess commented, then added with confusion. "We don't even know your names. Is there anything else we could do? We really want to thank you." She held Solo's hand in both of hers. "You saved my life."

He winked and strove for a rakish tone. A weak, strained croak was as close as he came. "Just wait till I'm patched up."

"Anytime." She winked at both of them, and led the back to the seats, after each of the passengers had shaken llyya's hand or granted him a grateful kiss.

For several moments they sat in silence, broken only by Solo's shallow breathing. Both he and llyya were touched, embarrassed by the overt gratitude of their fellow passengers. Seldom in their work did they see immediate emotional recompense for their services. It was both a gratifying and disconcerting experience.

"Nice to know we make a difference," Solo sighed. The final words were drowned by a wracking cough. Kuryakin wrapped his arms tighter around the wounded agent until the seizure passed.

The clarity of the difference they made had never been more dramatically emphasized than it had today. Kuryakin and Solo had stood between the passengers and death, and had turned the wolf from the door once more. Unfortunately, they paid a higher price this time. But the heroics here had not been because of some altruism as agent. It was the concern for each other, which had instigated the defeat of the terrorists. Friendship had transformed the tragedy to triumph and had changed a piece of history. Only fitting, llyya thought. Friendship had changed his life, and Napoleon's life, long ago.

'Yes, we make a difference,' he thought. "More than you know, my friend," llyya whispered aloud to his now unconscious partner.

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It was a cold evening wind that greeted TWA Flight 214 on the bleak runway in Germany. Solo's stretcher was removed to a waiting ambulance and Kuryakin stayed with him until the agent was taken into surgery. It wasn't until Solo's much damaged Saville Row suit, and belongings, were brought to him, that Kuryakin realized the communicator was still on an open channel.

"Hello?"

"Good to hear from you directly, Mister Kuryakin." Waverly's voice responded dryly.

"Ah - the channel has been open all this time, sir?"

"Yes. We picked up the entire ghastly episode, Mister Kuryakin," the UNCLE chief assured. "We were able to alert the proper authorities in Germany of your change in course. Unfortunately, there was little else we could do."

Kuryakin sighed heavily as he leaned against the cool wall of the hospital corridor. The entire episode still seemed a horrendous nightmare. Unfortunately, the horror did not go away when he opened his eyes.

"There was little any of us could do, sir."

"Not true." Waverly objected, his voice distant from the long-range transmission. "Your prompt action saved many lives. My congratulations to you. And to Mister Solo, too. By the way, how is Mister Solo?"

"I haven't received a report yet, but the doctors seemed to think he would recover without permanent complications. However, it will take time."

"Very well, Mister Kuryakin. You may take some time off. I'll let you know when your services are needed. Oh, and Mister Kuryakin. Let's have less heroics in future. I can't afford to lose two top agents over unwarranted gallantry."

llyya wondered if the chief was referring his own actions or to Solo's. No way to tell. Apparently New York interpreted the situation from what they heard -- which must have been a somewhat distorted account. He would like to see the interpretive report from that transmission! Still, Waverly had offered the best advice llyya had heard in a long time.

"Yes, sir," he returned enthusiastically, more than happy to comply with the new directive. He wondered if his gallant partner would take Mr. Waverly's advice.

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THE END

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